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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: LACK OF PROGRESS WEIGHS HEAVILY ON
MFA WORKING LEVEL

REF: ABIDJAN 43

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, 1.4 (b/d
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11. (C) SUMMARY: Desk officers from the MFA's AF and IO bureaus, in a January 10 meeting with AF/W desk officer Emily Plumb, expressed their dismay and frustration at the lack of progress towards a political solution in Cote d'Ivoire. The French remain committed to the various efforts by the international community -- the International Working Group (IWG), ECOWAS, AU, UNSC -- but our contacts were not confident that, despite these efforts, Cote d'Ivoire was moving in a positive direction. Our interlocutors were pessimistic that acceptable elections would take place by October 2007, and feared this would lead to the quandary of "what then?" Moreover, maintaining France's Operation Licorne was an increasing burden, both financially and in terms of cutting into military flexibility by tying down and wearing out assets. Our contacts stated, however, that there would be no change in Licorne's status until after the matter is reviewed following French presidential elections in April/May 2007. The U.S. and French officials expressed understanding of the other's concerns regarding UNSC sanctions and agreed to keep working together, taking into account the sometimes time-consuming nature of USG requirements, the positions of Russia and China, and the yet-to-be-determined posture of the new UNSC, in particular new member South Africa. Given the lack of a clear French recipe for ending the Cote d'Ivoire crisis, at least as articulated at the working level, the French may be receptive to any fresh thinking the USG can offer on Cote d'Ivoire (in line with ref A), including reducing UNSC activity on the account or suppressing the IWG. END SUMMARY.

FRENCH OFFER GLOOMY OUTLOOK

12. (C) MFA Cote d'Ivoire desk officer Charlotte Montel (joined later by IO desk officer Franck Paris) met on January 10 with AF/W counterpart Emily Plumb and Embassy Africa Watchers. Speaking candidly (as is her custom), Montel said that the French were comfortable with UNSCR 1721, although its negotiation had been difficult. "We know we can't go much farther than 1721," she commented. However, voicing what would be the main theme of her presentation, she added that little of consequence had occurred since its adoption. PM Konan Banny, ostensibly given more authority, had done little. Although disappointed in him, Montel said France continued to support "the international community's man" as

there was "no other option." She commented that he at least seemed dedicated and a person of integrity.

¶3. (C) Montel noted the complicated geometry of concentric and overlapping circles of power and influence among and between individuals, factions, parties, President Gbagbo's allies, the various opposition groups, and the rebels. Konan Banny often seemed isolated and thus powerless within this context. Gbagbo was skilled at manipulating situations of this kind, an example being his cat-and-mouse game of whether to attend IWG meetings. France was often accused of being excessively anti-Gbagbo (and thus possibly impeding the peace process), but Montel said that the French still felt deeply "disappointed and betrayed" by the November 2004 bombing and its aftermath, the scars from which had not yet healed.

¶4. (C) On a positive note, Montel said that MPCFI leader Guillaume Soro planned to attend the January 12 IWG meeting, which would be a first. Attendance at the January 12 meeting would be at a relatively high level, with Germany sending its Deputy FM (in part because of Germany's EU presidency) and South Africa's Deputy FM also planning to attend. Ghana's FM would participate, as would EU Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid Louis Michel. Still, Montel conceded that the IWG had proved to be relatively powerless. She noted the several other institutions involved (but only at a distance) in Cote d'Ivoire -- ECOWAS, the AU, and the UNSC. Unfortunately, each seemed to await a decision by one of the others and a tendency had developed where each would endorse a declaration issued by one of the others, often based on an IWG statement. None was willing to enforce action. Embassy Africa Watcher commented that this circumstance tended to weaken the credibility of these institutions (notably the

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UNSC) and he cautioned against France's penchant for seeking a supportive UNSC PRST after every IWG meeting. Montel took the point but indicated that France's heavy investment in the IWG at the political level, with Minister-Delegate for Cooperation, Development, and Francophonie Brigitte Girardin heading the French team at every IWG meeting, required that its actions be endorsed by the UNSC. Moreover, a collateral benefit of the regular PRST negotiations was to keep UNSC delegations and the UN Secretariat engaged.

¶5. (C) Other outside actors with unpredictable influence on Cote d'Ivoire included Burkina Faso (whose support or lack thereof for the rebels was still unclear), new UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon (not likely to be more interested in Cote d'Ivoire than his predecessor), and South Africa, whose presence on the UNSC could complicate matters. SGSR Schori would be leaving his post soon, and his successor was unknown.

¶6. (C) Summing up, Montel said that the situation in Cote d'Ivoire did not look promising. Gbagbo continued to evade the pressures the international community tried to apply to him, so there had been no significant movement for months. The same forces that worked to cancel the October 2006 elections looked to be in place to do the same for the October 2007 elections, and, as the international community learned in 2006, "October will arrive sooner than we think." The international community's interest was sporadic, divided among several institutions which were not always in synch, and the new UNSC was an unknown quantity. Montel noted that the "cold civil war" (Emily Plumb's characterization) in Cote d'Ivoire and its static nature were "not bad enough for anyone to really do anything," even if the international community were not faced with other more high-profile concerns.

¶7. (C) Pressures within France centered on Operation Licorne and its continuing, no-end-in-sight presence, coming at serious cost (about 1 billion euro since its inception, at a price of about 250 million euro annually), Montel said. The French military had been pushing for a political solution so as to reduce or stand down Licorne, as its four-month

troop and equipment rotations were wearing out men and materiel without visibly advancing the peace process. However, Montel said unequivocally that there would be no change in Licorne's status until after the French presidential election in April/May 2007. There would likely be a review of French policy after the election, no matter which side won. France's long-term policies towards Cote d'Ivoire were thus unclear as well -- until the election and policy review took place, it was difficult to predict what French policy would be, which hampered present thinking. Looming beyond these concerns, Montel said, was the question of what to do if the October elections did not take place, which seemed increasingly likely. "I'm not sure anyone has any ideas on what to do then," she remarked. Montel indicated that, paradoxically, while France did not want to be left "holding the bag" in Cote d'Ivoire, the continued presence of Licorne gave the impression that France was doing just that and was willing to do so, which reduced international engagement that might allow Licorne to withdraw.

SANCTIONS ISSUE

18. (C) Discussion of the sanctions issue began with both sides expressing understanding of the concerns of the other. Nonetheless, the French, led by IO desk officer Franck Paris, expressed disappointment that the USG process for approving sanctions was, in French eyes, so time-consuming. The inability to reach a decision on the three names the French now wanted to include (Kone, Dogbo, and Brou) prior to the change in the UNSC on January 1 presented serious problems, with South Africa on the Council. AF/W Plumb noted French concerns and said that the Treasury Department was working on the issue but that Treasury was responsible for issues covering the globe and was unable to respond in as timely a fashion as one might hope. Expressing his personal opinion, Paris noted, however, that despite concerns about South Africa, it had been possible to work closely with that country in the past (e.g., on the Great Lakes) and that perhaps his pessimism was unwarranted.

19. (C) Still, Paris believed that South Africa would be

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reluctant to support sanctioning other Africans as one of its first acts on the Council. Plumb said that the U.S. continued to support sanctions against Affi N'Guessan and Coulibaly. It was important to act against them, as "leaders," rather than against lower-ranking "followers." Paris said that the GOF had lobbied Russia and China extensively and that they seemed prepared to support the three most recently named. Both sides agreed to continue working on all five names, and agreed moreover that sanctions that had already been imposed, e.g., in the case of Charles Ble Goude, seemed to have had a positive effect. Montel noted Ble Goude's relatively quiet stance, and that of his faction, which she attributed in part to his desire to have sanctions against him lifted.

110. (C) COMMENT: Our working-level MFA interlocutors, while continuing to work hard, remain engaged, and do their best to facilitate progress in Cote d'Ivoire, are clearly demoralized by the lack of movement over what has become many months and by the limited future prospects they perceive. They seem most troubled by the possibility that today's supposedly "temporary" arrangement, to expire once elections take place, may, through inertia, become permanent, with Gbagbo more firmly entrenched and with little ability or willingness on the international community's part to effect real change. Licorne remains an increasingly heavy burden, yet its withdrawal absent a political solution could create even bigger problems. Given these concerns -- and their principal worry about being "left to hold the bag" -- the French may now be receptive to any fresh ideas the USG can offer on resolving the Cote d'Ivoire crisis, the consideration of which ref A advises. END COMMENT.

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